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THE 3-MINUTE INTERVIEW

Pam Cressey

A large number of freed and escaped slaves migrated to Union-held Alexandria during the Civil War. Now, archaeologists are excavating a cemetery in Alexandria for them, trying to identify as many graves as possible before the site is turned into a memorial park. Pam Cressey, the city archaeologist for Alexandria, is in charge of the dig.

You've been digging at the site of the Alexandria Freedmen's Cemetery since May. What have you found?

We've found more than 100 grave shafts. Plus the 123 graves we'd found before, we're almost to 250. We've also found a lot of Native American artifacts from when it was a bluff overlooking Hunting Creek.

So you've found skeletons?

No. We're required to find the top of the hole that would have been dug for the coffin. Because this is a preservation program, we want to know where all the old graves are and the design of the cemetery itself. Then we can use that in the design of the [memorial] park. The site has had a lot of impacts — an office building, a gas station, a brickyard, roads, the Beltway [have been built]. There's been a lot of disturbance.

Do you think you'll find more graves?

We expect to find more graves. There were 1,800 [people buried according to] a record book kept by the superintendent of all refugee blacks. There's two areas we're not excavating: under the concrete slabs on which the gas station and office building sat for years. If removed, it could cause damage [to the graves].

What kinds of Native American artifacts have you found?

They're from 4,000 to 6,000 years ago. They're primarily tools.

How did you get interested in a career in archaeology?

I love stories and mysteries, and archaeology is the best mystery: You never know what you're going to find. — Maria Hegstad

